
Obituary

Stuart Keith 1931–2003

As one of the three main editors of *The Birds of Africa*, Stuart Keith's name will always be particularly associated with African ornithology, and although he had a wonderful knowledge in this field, he was a world birder *par excellence*. He was the first person to see more than 4,000 species, and his eventual life list topped 6,500.

He was born in Hertfordshire in 1931 and, after spending the duration of the Second World War in Canada with his family, returned to England, where he was educated at Marlborough. He saw service in the Korean War as an infantry officer before going to Oxford, where he read Classics. His interest in birds had been awakened even before arriving in Canada, and he spent his army leave in Hong Kong, so had established a long life list well before embarking on a career. Undecided what to do about the latter, the decision was made easier following an extensive birding trip round the USA with his brother in 1956, and he resolved to study ornithology. Thus, he became a research associate of the American Museum of Natural History in 1958, and thereafter lived in America.

His wide experience of Africa dates from the early 1960s, when he was collecting birds in East Africa for the museum, becoming deeply interested in the distribution and taxonomy of African birds, and in their vocalisations. He had a very good ear and a retentive memory, which not only ensured his mastery of field identification, but also prompted him to start recording bird song. He published several papers on new distributional records, and described a new subspecies of White-crowned Starling *Spreo albicapillus* from northern Kenya. Further publications followed in 1968, and the next year he was senior author of a valuable study of the avifauna of the Impenetrable Forest in Uganda. In 1971 he published his groundbreaking recordings of African forest birds, featuring 95 species, and also made a feature-length film about African birds, which he narrated and showed round America. The same year, he travelled extensively in Madagascar with Don Turner and Alec Forbes-Watson, and recorded the voice of the endemic



flufftail, *Sarothrura insularis*, which was hitherto unknown, and published a fascinating paper in *Bull. Br. Ornithol. Cl.* He had, prior to this, authored an in-depth review of the genus *Sarothrura*.

He was also very active in birding in America, and in 1969 formed an information exchange with a group of friends, which soon became the American Birding Association (ABA), of which he was the first president, and a director until 1990. ABA now has over 20,000 members. In 1993 he was awarded the Eisenmann medal of the Linnean Society of New York in recognition of his achievements.

In 1980 he commenced his long association with *The Birds of Africa* (BoA) project, Leslie Brown's brainchild of the 1970s. Following Leslie's death, Stuart became one of the three editors with Emil Urban and Hilary Fry. He was, with Hilary, a major contributor to the text, drawing on his broad field experience and his knowledge of field

characters and vocalisations to produce eminently readable and lively accounts. He had always been a keen collector of recordings of African birds, and listened to these constantly while writing his texts.

Despite suffering ill health for many years, he remained a keen and determined traveller, and always revelled in finding new birds. Once, when he was staying with my wife and I in Kent, I took him to see a Savi's Warbler *Locustella luscinioides*—new for his British list—and, although not at all well and finding walking very difficult, he insisted on getting to the bird. I also recall his look of glee when we both had the same lifer together in Ghana, and turned to each other with the snap identification. His birding was not without other problems. On one occasion, a hippopotamus *Hippopotamus* charged him, and on another he almost lost a leg to a fur seal *Arctocephalus* on the Pribilofs, and needed 32 stitches. More recently, he told me that while twitching the first Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* for California, his driver fell asleep and they wrote the car off in a ravine in the only place for hundreds of yards where they didn't face certain death.

Although deeply serious about his birds, and expected other people to match his own high standards, Stuart had a great sense of humour and a dry wit, which was delightful. He published a number of popular and humorous articles, and once during one of the biennial editors meetings of *BoA* in London, we spent some time inventing new cisticola species while discussing the relevant plates for Vol 5. They included Whining, Whiffing, Whingeing and then the least impressive species, the Piffing. The names were more fun than the plates.

Early in 2003, Stuart had all but finished reading proofs for Vol 7, and I had sent him colour photocopies of the plates, on which his criticism was very valuable. These, however, arrived after he had left on a long-planned birding trip to Micronesia with his wife, Sallyann, and a small party of relatives and friends. He saw his last lifer, the Caroline Islands Ground Dove *Gallicolumba kubaryi*, on the day before he died of a stroke on the island of Chuuk (Truk), on 13 February 2003. ☹

Martin Woodcock